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Duty and "Fast Living": The Diary of Mary Johnson Sprow, Domestic Worker

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PRIMARY VOICES

Duty and "Fast Living" The Diary of Mary Johnson Sprow, Domestic Worker

edited with an introduction by Elizabeth Clark-Lewis

I found it. I finally found it," said Mary Johnson Sprow when she called me in her softly excited voice. "For near a year you've been a worriation; had me looking high and low to lay my hands on it again. So, just come on over here and see it. Will this stop you from worrying me about all this old-time stuff?"

In the fall of 1979 my great-aunt Mary Johnson Sprow found a diary she had written while working as a domestic servant more than 60 years before. For more than seven years I had conducted interviews with her, her three other siblings, and their spouses; finally, I would touch the paper on which she so tenderly placed

her thoughts as a young live-in servant from rural Virginia. The diary and oral history interviews helped me flesh out the history of young women who migrated to Washington from the rural South before and during the "Great Migration." This research became the underpinning of my University of Maryland dissertation and articles on African-American migration to Washington during the period 1900 to 1940.¹

I conducted oral history interviews with Mary Johnson Sprow, a diminutive woman with a captivating smile and irrepressible spirit, from 1974 until her death in 1981 at the age of 95. This article presents excerpts from her oral interviews, her diary as recorded from 1914 until 1937, and subsequent film interviews in order to round out the picture in as many of her own utterances as possible. Mary Johnson Sprow, like all of the 106 migrants I have interviewed, helped me understand the lives of this little-studied group of Washingtonians. In 1910 nearly 90 percent of the city's gainfully employed African-American women worked in domestic service.²

Mary Johnson Sprow was a resident of Washington for nearly 80 years. Her diaries provide, from the insider's perspec-

Notes begin on page 92.

Mary Johnson, photographed circa 1910, was probably 24 years old when she stood for this wasp-waisted portrait. A Washington domestic worker for nearly 80 years, she kept diaries and collected family documents. Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, her grand-niece, has annotated portions of Johnson's diary from 1915 to 1918. These materials illuminate a little-studied, turn-of-the-century Washington community. All illustrations, unless otherwise noted, appear courtesy of Elizabeth Clark-Lewis.



In this rare snapshot, a uniformed Mary Johnson Sprow, 70, waits on the children's table at an unnamed employer's Christmas party in 1955.

tive, vignettes from the world of one of the city's early 20th century African-American domestic workers. As her grand-niece, I am very happy to have recovered and presented the story of this remarkable woman. Her story is one of the very few first-person sources for understanding the feelings, experiences, and aspirations of members of this important social and economic group as they confronted life in the first generation after slavery and made the leap from live-in service to day work.

Mary begins her diary with an introduction to herself and her family, part of which is excerpted on page 55. She explains that she is the daughter of Peyton Johnson, a poor sheep-shearer who had learned his trade while a slave on the farm of John Walden, a pros-

perous Fauquier County, Virginia, lawyer. Walden had acquired Peyton from Walden's brother William in the early 1820s. William was both owner and father of this slave named Peyton. The same receipt, which is part of the family's collection of documents, also notes the transfer of Peyton's mother Winnie to John Walden. The receipt stipulated that neither mother nor child could ever be sold from John Walden's farm. Peyton and Winnie were the property of John Walden from the 1820s until they were freed in 1865—at the end of the Civil War.³

Mary then records that her mother is Eliza Dickson. The Dickson family Bible lists Eliza as the first of eight children born to Marttora and Rinar Dickson. This Bible lists Eliza's date of birth as December 6, 1852. The family oral tradition states that she was born a slave on the Stewart farm in Caroline County, Virginia.⁴

The exact date of the marriage of Peyton and Eliza is not known. It is believed that Eliza married Peyton in May 1874. The family oral tradition says Eliza and Peyton were married about six months before she and her husband were able to buy land, and tax records show that Peyton paid taxes on 2.3 acres of land in Catalpha, Culpeper County, Virginia, in 1874. In addition, the 1876 tax records show they paid personal property, county school, and district school taxes. The family oral tradition is filled with stories of Peyton Johnson's success as a sheep shearer; surviving tax records show that he was able to purchase more land in April 1892.⁵

In the Johnson family Bible, Mary Elizabeth's date of birth is clearly listed as March 30, 1885: Mary was the 23rd child of Peyton Johnson, who fathered a total of 33 children with three wives, Cora, Braugh, and Eliza. In the diary Mary, the seventh child of 19 born to Eliza, expresses embarrassment at the size of her family. Although Mary was the second daughter born to Peyton and Eliza, she was the first female child to live into adulthood. Her el-

der sister Rena had died within six months of her February 1884 birth.⁶

As a child in rural Virginia, Mary received three years of education in a "small but sturdy Antioch Church School," according to her diary. "It was up to I guess fourth grade with Rev. Madden teaching as he could. It was a one-room colored school that was teaching just about enough so you don't have to make a X and you could read just a very little." Her diary noted that "too many children caused a need for money so I was put to work by age nine" in Catalpha for the white overseer of a farm near her home. She never lost her buoyant, playful disposition or her determination "to laugh, be playful and eat something sweet everyday."

In the absence of definite documentation, the best guess is that in 1898, at age 12, Mary left rural Catalpha for the possibilities offered by Washington, D.C. She was part of the flow of outward migration from the South between 1900 and 1920, when cities such as Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, New York and Philadelphia shifted from reliance on European immigrants to African Americans for household service. African-American women from the rural South came to dominate the Washington domestic service market at this time.⁷

In preparation for work, the Johnson children received a rudimentary education while, like most of their neighbors, they underwent the process of home training. First they learned basic housework from their parents. Next they were placed with kin who were already working for white families in the area. Then family members arranged for the children, often age eight or nine, to work alone in full-time, live-in jobs for local working-class whites. Finally the young workers moved to the city as links in the chain of family- and village-based migration. Older kin (or hometown connections) received them and helped place them in better jobs.

Mary's older half-brother Henry

Johnson, already established as a laborer, sent for young Mary to live with his extended family and care for the household's children. The household would benefit from her help while providing additional training for a future position as live-in servant. This type of family connection also provided security and continuity for children far from home.

In recent interviews, Mary recalled how she chafed at the attitudes of those, including her own family members, who believed that simply because she was a poor African-American female born in the rural South, she should work as a live-in servant all of her life. Living in meant being on call to one's employers 24 hours a day. Living in meant little if any privacy, few opportunities for a social life, and minimal independence.

Those women like Mary who ultimately made the transition from live-in service to day work sought the autonomy of setting their own schedule and tasks. Live-out work meant that the worker had the freedom to quit an unpleasant situation; she did not rely on her employer for the roof over her head. Living out also meant that in general the women no longer had to wear uniforms dictated by their employers. A servant in uniform took on the identity of her job; a servant in her own clothes did her work, was paid, and then went home to her own place.⁸

Mary's detailed diary expresses her nagging fear that as a live-in worker, in some ways she is no better than a slave (page 56); but, she quickly admitted that the indignities of domestic service were no match for slavery's unyielding horrors, which were living memories for many of her family members. In fact, as she records, Mary was able to create happiness for herself in some areas of her life as a live-in domestic.

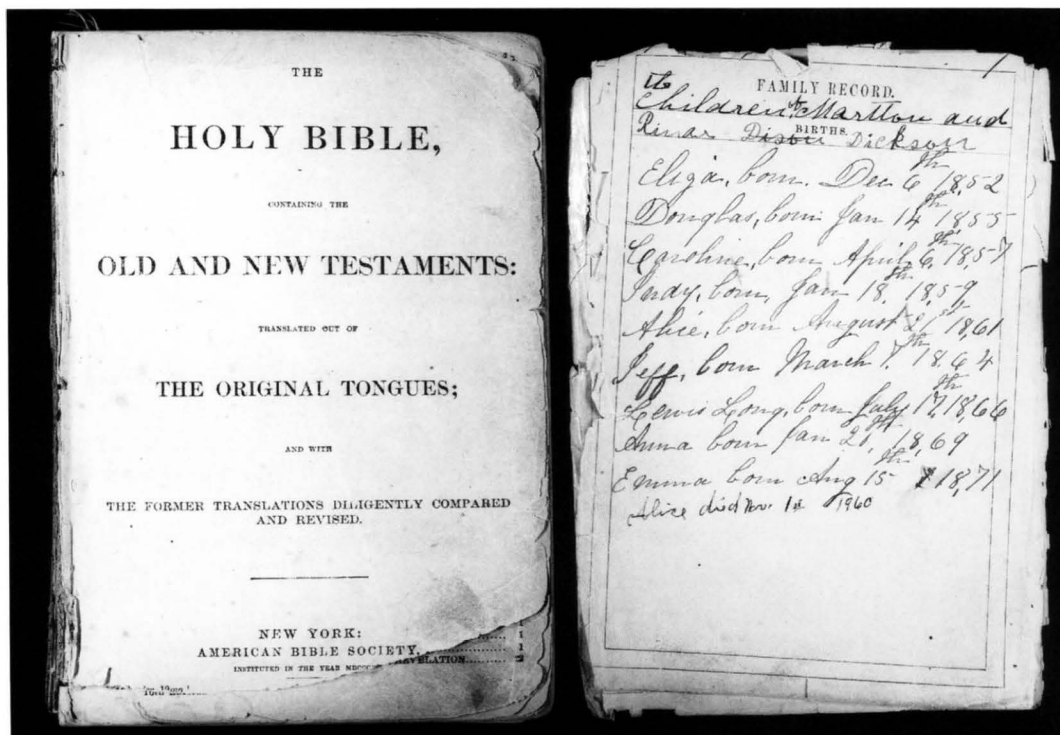
Mary Johnson writes her history on her terms, settling scores—at least on paper—with those who dared cross her and finding rich meaning in the often meaningless

order of her days. She briefly details how she did not like her period of tutelage with her older brother Charles, his wife Lilly, and their three children, which occurred just after the turn of the century. "They worked as a couple [for a white family]," she said in an interview, "and from the day I came here I was left alone with them spoiled kids; my brother Charles was too taken with his little girl Helen."

After a year, Mary left Charles's home to return to Henry's. Between 1898 and 1910 she trained with various family members, either helping in their homes or assisting them in their domestic jobs elsewhere. She left Henry's around 1910 to work for a white family alongside another older brother, Memphis, who had come to Washington in the early 1890s. Memphis had worked for a series of families, including that of Senator John C. Spooner of Wisconsin. Another employer, Washington businessman J. P. Clark, later described Memphis as "faithful, reliable and in every respect a good man." It was Memphis

Johnson, six years Mary's senior, who placed the young woman in her first live-in job in Washington, in the L Street, N.W., home of Senator Spooner. There she served as a "maid's helper," performing chores with "Miss Lizzie [Elizabeth Bundy Johnson]" who was Memphis Johnson's wife and the "lady's maid" for the Spooner household. Elizabeth Bundy Johnson had started as a "general helper" with the Spooner family and was promoted to "upstairs maid," after about two years.⁹

By late 1916, after more than six years' service, Mary Johnson was regularly filling her diary with her determination to leave live-in work, stressing that she had the will and the ability to make the transition to domestic day worker, despite her family's resistance. The Johnson family was dominated from Catalpha after the 1913 death of Peyton by the stern matriarch Eliza, who disapproved of the "fast living"—the unchaperoned dances, films, and other events—readily available to

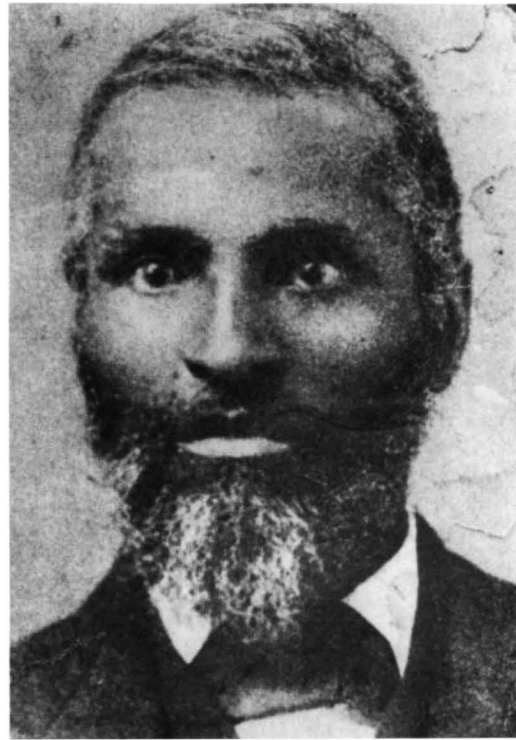


young women living on their own. The family believed that by living in and remaining accountable to employers at all times, Mary would be secure and receive the supervision necessary for respectable young women.

But with her dogged resistance, Mary personified the determination that women workers brought to the eventual transformation of domestic work from near-slavery to independent contracting. Her words lucidly state how small things, such as her desperate desire to attend study classes with the 12th Street Bible Club or take in a show at the Howard Theater, prodded her quest for more independence and autonomy.

Mary Johnson finally left live-in work in November 1916 and moved into a room in a boarding house. Her subsequent diary entries show her reveling in her small freedoms: a place in which to receive callers; time off to attend a dance. But within eight months of becoming a daily paid household worker, Mary was forced to return to live-in servant work. At first, when her siblings in Washington tried to force her into substituting for a sister whose pregnancy was at risk, she was able to resist her kin's unyielding pressure. But then Mary was called back home to rural Catalpha, where her mother gave her no choice.

The control Mary's mother exerted despite her distance from Washington was exceptional. When Eliza Johnson wrote to Memphis on August 31, 1914, she outlined instructions for each of the children in the capital, scheduling their visits home, listing their duties upon arrival there, and reminding them of their financial responsibility to a mother who was only "tolerably well." Eliza regularly wrote such commanding letters to Memphis (she rarely wrote her daughters directly but relied on



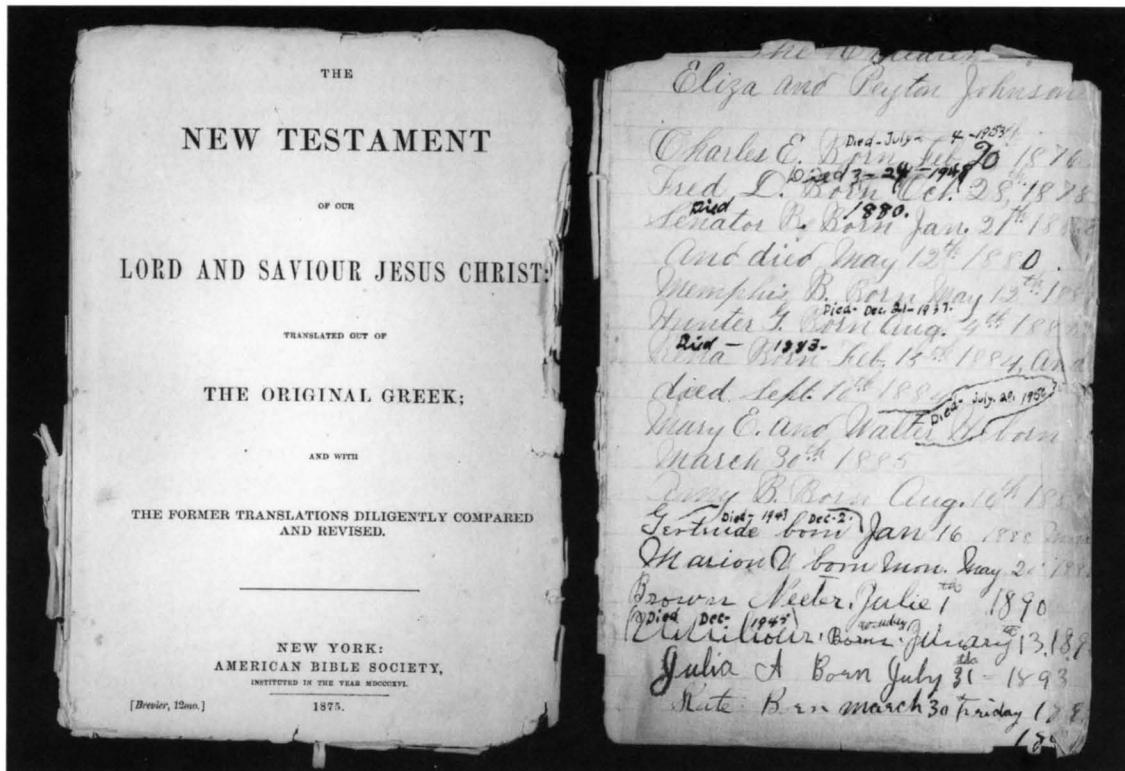
Peyton Johnson, born a slave in Fauquier County, Virginia, married three times and was the father of 33 children, including Mary Johnson Sprow.

the superior status of her sons to make her will known and followed). It came as no surprise, then, when Mary was summoned home and compelled to take her sister's "live-in servant" position until her sister was able to reclaim the job.

Thus by June 1917, Mary had returned to Washington and live-in domestic work, traveling with her sister's employers to Lake George in New York State. From the outset, however, she forcefully wrote in her diary of her unalterable plan to leave live-in employment. In fact, 1917 would be her last year of live-in service and her last trip with *any* employer. She returned to Washington in October, having transferred the live-in job to another family member, and resumed the freedom of day work.¹⁰

While these excerpts from Mary's diary

This family Bible dates from slavery and records the birth of Eliza Dickson, Mary Johnson Sprow's mother, in 1852.



describe her daily work and travel to her employers' vacation homes between 1916 and 1918, they are most significant for their record of the off-duty social lives of the servants, both live-in and live-out. Mary writes of where they go, who they meet, and how they spend their hungered-for leisure time—their own time away from the kitchen, dust mop, and uniform. Her aspirations, perceptions, and interpretations show that she believed she was far more than the sum of her problems, as enormous and multifarious as those problems were.

Mary Johnson's era was not an open period for the Washington African-American community. Her life reflects a community divided into three class-conscious groups. The first of these was an educated class, with well-established positions in the city, bearing the famous names of Terrell, Cook, and Wormley. Next were "the respectables,"

not rich but church-going and active in community organizations. These families included the Walkers, Carters, and Bundys. Washington's working class, at the bottom of which stood the city's black masses, was often viewed with disdain by the more privileged because the poor, as historian Jacqueline Anne Rouse described it, were "too emotional in their worshipping" and too "undisciplined" in their social lives.¹¹

While Mary aspired to join the second rank, she nonetheless wrote with immense delight of her participation in the emotional worship services and her love for the "undisciplined" socials, dances, plays, and "church singings" associated with the black masses. Oblivious to the sneers of her "betters," Mary affirmed the

The Johnson family homestead was "four miles from Catalpha off the waterside's road" in Culpeper County, Virginia, on land purchased by Peyton Johnson in 1874.

Mary carefully collected and preserved invaluable family documents, including the Bible that recorded her birth and those of her 32 siblings.

strength and support she gained from her family, community, and church.

Women such as Mary Johnson Sprow established and sustained support networks with other women who had left live-in service in the 1920s and 1930s. These networks provided role models for the transition into daily paid work, mentors who did not belittle the former live-in's desire for independence. These women shared their knowledge of how to operate in several households simultaneously. They also formed self-help groups, savings clubs, and burial societies, which augmented the region- or kin-based associations that also provided African Americans with some social security.¹²

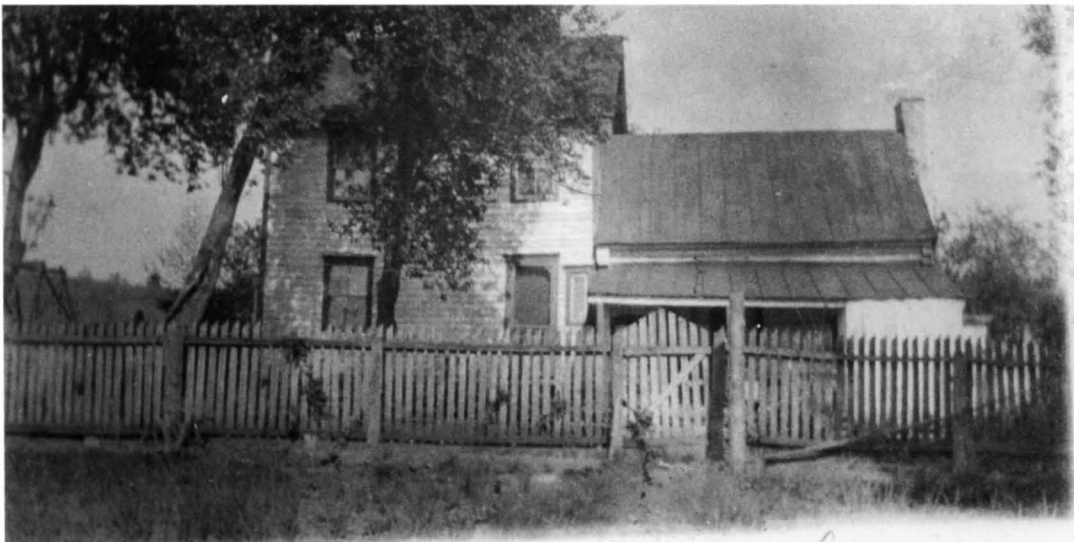
In the last section of her diary excerpted here, Mary writes of her love for "Mr. Sprow," a man she met at one of her community's dances. For more than a year, she traces their romance—her moments of triumph and despair, the absolute joy and utter misery of this relationship. Mary Johnson is enthralled by Luray

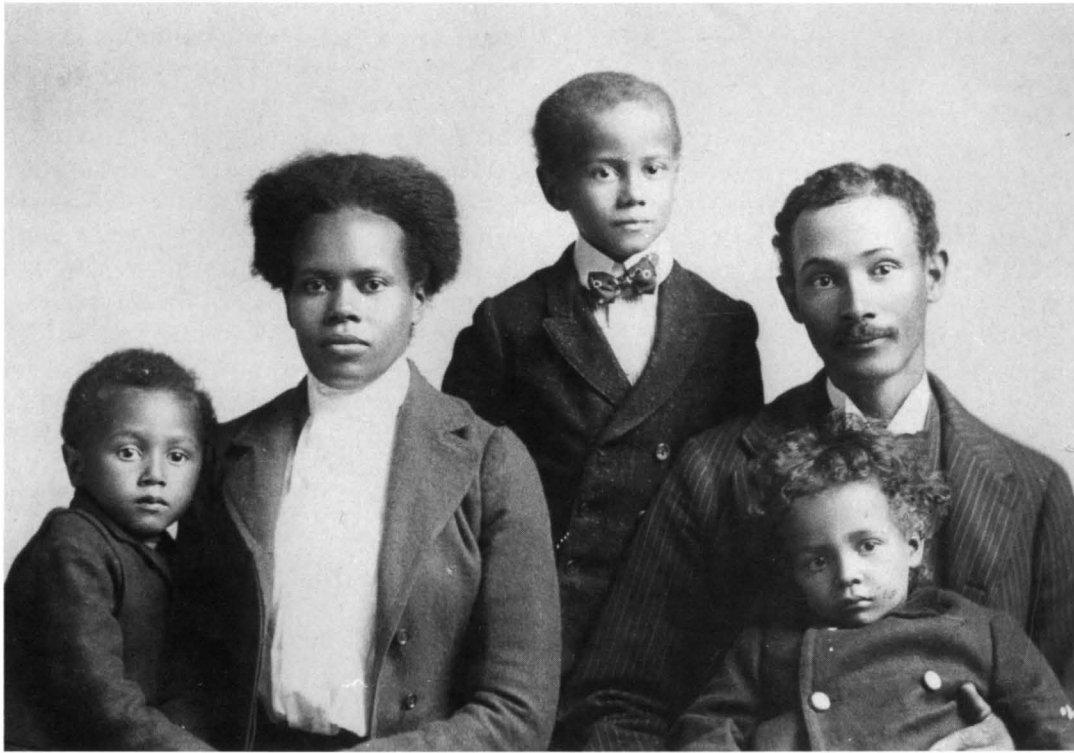
Sprow, a yardman for a wealthy Georgetown family. The developments in this courtship are universal and timeless.

Mary Johnson Sprow died in Washington in 1981 after more than 80 years of work in domestic service. Her diary and oral history offer a different view from historians who emphasize the victimization of America's domestics such as David Katzman and Donald Sutherland. These excerpts, combined with rare family documents and photographs, stress the power and autonomy of a working-class woman.

Within the confines of segregated African-American society Mary Johnson Sprow seized every opportunity to gain control. From her success at leaving live-in work to her insistence on choosing her own husband, she is an emancipated womanist, to quote Alice Walker. A long line of African-American women directed and timed her home training. After she began working "out-for-whitefolks," she was never again a mere extension or reflection of her white employer. Mary shows us how domestics were neither, as contemporary writers would have it, the "stranger" within anyone's gate nor sad, passive people who simply reacted to the changes in the world around them.¹³

In this diary and in her words, Mary





Soon after she first came to Washington in 1898, Mary lived with her brother Charles, his wife Lilly Diggs, and their three young children. For a number of years, Mary tended the children of her siblings and received training in how to be a maid.

Johnson Sprow reveals how African-American women were simultaneously intricate and plain; overt and subtle; visible and veiled. She helps me again realize why the women who have been “domestics” will themselves write the correctives to this culture’s misconceptions about them.



Elizabeth Clark-Lewis is assistant professor of history and director of the Public History Program at Howard University.

DOCUMENTS

Mary Johnson Sprow's Diary

Note: These excerpts have been edited for spelling and punctuation.

As Mary Johnson Sprow's diary begins in July 1916, she is working as a live-in servant at the Massachusetts summer home of a relative of the John Spooner family, her older brother's employer. She describes the unending demands of her employers, her off-duty pleasures, her visits with friends who are also live-in servants, and the daily recreational activities the servants develop for themselves. Most important, she knows she is not able to look to her live-in servant friends or her family to affirm her conviction that she will—and should—one day leave live-in servant work. In a 1977 interview she explained "you'd thought I was talking about killing somebody the way they looked at me when I told them I was leaving live-in service. And I dare not tell brother Memphis. No, he wouldn't hear of it; hard as he worked to keep us all in jobs."¹⁴

I have for many years wanted to write a story of my life, no matter how short it is. I feel like it will give me a satisfaction. So tonight I try on the 30th of July in 1916. I am now on a little island in Mass. for the summer. It has been six years I am working—it was then that I had the same thoughts as I have now.

But this has been a summer of blues. We have been here six long weeks and in that time have had about eight sunny days. Is not that alone enough to give a poor lonely girl a long face when we look out and watch and it is very sad. The wind blows hard; the rain beats beside the window pane with a loud bang.

We are situated on a beautiful cliff surrounded by large houses and small cottages. Our cottage is quite small and as Dickens would say—considered by the lady herself attractive. And while I am describing the state of things I might just as well say who I am. So my readers if there ever will be one may understand why I write my thoughts on paper. To clear them out of my head.

I am a poor maid that has toiled many years for a living and has really become tired of it but still see no way out of it but to give up life; to give up life my dear friends takes on more thoughts than one. What is life? Why are we made? And what are we made of? Why do we have to slave for our daily bread? Why can't we have our daily bread when we ask God to give us our daily bread?

Then what is work? Who made work? To clean and scrub days in and days out. Above all who made the people that we toil for? that never knows what it is to want and yet is never thankful for nothing that we do, no matter how hard no matter how we try to please. When I look at them I see that they are made of the same flesh and blood as we. I see that they eat three times a day same as we—but only after being waited upon they enjoys it better because their digestion organ have had the rest while our body and minds work all the time. Our minds works so fast that when we are sleep we have bad dreams. We gets bad dreams from food that has not been well masticated with the teeth; only swallowed and left for the stomach to do.

After all, work would not be such a task if it was not for the ingratitude we get from our employers. But then all of the good boys and girls that can, find better works. You can get something to do that don't take all day and night; and you have parents that try to make something out of you. I ask over and over, why try with all your heart and brain to make something out of yourselves when there is no hope? So while it is true that you work to make a living for yourself, I feels it will be little different than a slave. Our life is not in some ways as good as a slave, when they held men and women as slaves before the Civil War. When they felt like being Stubborn, it was alright for them because their master had them to feed and clothe and keep them.

While my dear friends if we stop work—all



Mary Johnson, left, double-dated with her brother Memphis, far right, and his wife-to-be Elizabeth Bundy. As was customary, family members tried to arrange marriages for their siblings with suitable hometowners. Mary did not, however, find Glen Bundy, Elizabeth's brother, second from left, to her taste. He later married her sister Amey. At the time of this picnic all four worked as live-in servants.

Memphis Johnson, Mary's brother and mentor, pauses with his cargo of Frances H. Clark, daughter of Frank B. Clark, and her cat. Johnson worked as a general servant/yardman for 25 years before receiving an appointment as a government messenger.

Mattie and Henry eleven and nine. The situation of only two children didn't seem to please my mother so she started on a family of her own. I don't know whether it would be nice today to tell how many her family was. I will not say but only start and count them for you. . . .

September 15 Mary Stakes and I started up to Miss Miller and got caught in a storm. It was the first time in my life that I ever saw a rainbow . . . the rainbow looked like a string of gold.

September 20 We left Nantucket today for Washington. We had a beautiful sail to New Bedford.

September 21 We got into New York at seven-thirty and went from there to the Penn Station. The strike was on and we had to ride to 5th ave.

September 30 We left Washington for Jamestown, R.I. The night on the water was the most beautiful moonlight that I ever seen.

October 1 We arrive here at eleven I at once fell in love with Jamestown and above all the beautiful bungalow. We [the servants] have to move to a bad place. I am leaving this work. I will, I will. No matter when, I will.

October 29 Miss Band and Mrs. Porter came over to see me but they got lost.

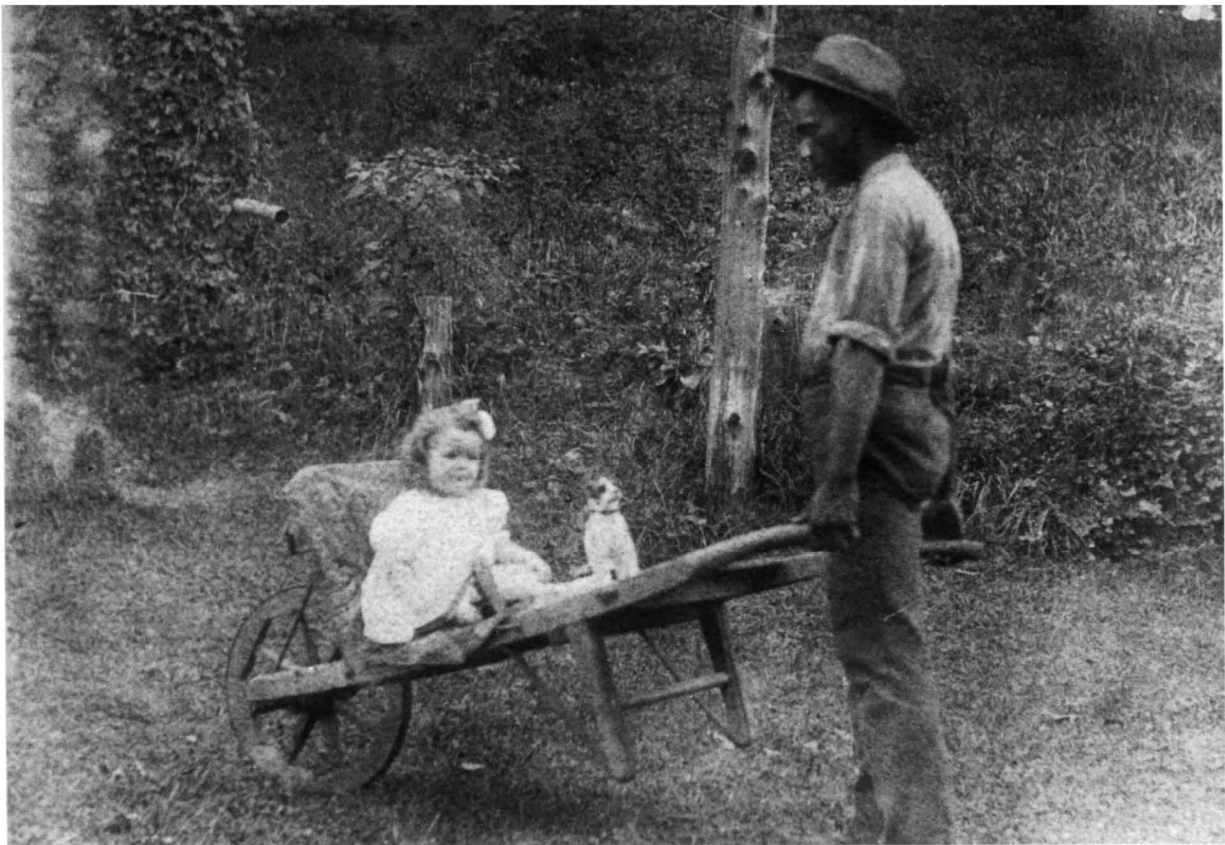
October 30 Worked for madam, cleaned and went over to Carson's cottage. I will leave. Each day I know better just how.

October 31 Board[ship] on the Pot [Potomac] River for New York. [Via Norfolk]

November 1 Arrive in New York. I will spend night with brother. At night we go to the

is over just like the big clock on the wall. Not that I want slavery, no I don't want that in my life. No, never, for slavery was so bad—but I think about it and I know again. I remember how bad I was told it was and they talked about it just to show what our lives are like now.

Now to tell you about my house. It is a little house in Virginia four miles from Catalpha off the waterside's road. We live about one-eighth of a mile from the road. Now when I look back at the grounds I think that our little home should have had a very popular name. At home lives my father and mother—she having been his third wife. He having been the father of thirty-three children. My father had ten children by his first wife and six by the next wife. When he married my mother the children by his first wife were grown and working for themselves; and he only had two under age—



Hippodrome. Take the express to Washington. He is cross, I have told him my plans. And he can't tell the Senator nothing. We quarrel but I will not stay with the family. I said I will leave. Now I will.

Mary Johnson Sprow's family strongly opposes her leaving live-in servant work and its economic and physical security. They also worry about the lack of chaperones in the big city and her attraction to "plays, dances and fast living." But Mary's desire for independence is typical of many African Americans born the generation after slavery; her tenacity is typical of the Johnson family in general. In this next section, she has left live-in work and is about to embrace the responsibilities and pleasures that her freedom bring despite fears of her family's reaction.

November 2 Arrive in Washington go to sister's and sleep all morning. Looks for place [to live] in afternoon. I find it small and clean. Kate is coming, now she will know I am not with the Senator. Will she tell Mamma?

Mary Johnson has three older sisters (siblings from her father's first and second marriages) and four older married brothers (children of her mother and father) living in Washington. Out of respect, she refers to her older sisters and her sisters-in-law (the wives of her older brothers) as "Sister." Therefore, it is not always known to which "Sister" she refers.

November 4 Sister comes down and we take dinner with [younger sister] Julia. Nothing said but she knows I left the Senator. She is not so cross, just quiet to me.

November 5 Goes over to the train with Kate and she misses train. I tell her all and she is not angry but for how long? I can't know.

November 6 Starts my work.

November 7 Gives Clarence [her pet dog] a birthday present. This was my first party. Small like my room but I work and keep myself. Sister is still cross that I am not living-in. I sent money home. I can do for me.

These excerpts introduce the love of Mary Johnson's life—Luray Sprow. "Mr. Sprow" works as a general laborer and yard man for a family in Georgetown. This section underscores the liberation represented by "daywork"—household service work that a woman performs for set hours without living in the employer's home. As a dayworker Mary is able to choose her working hours and expand her social circle. She no longer relies on hometown or family connections to meet potential suitors. She refers below to a ticket sent by "Mr. Smith," another domestic laborer, to the Grafton boys dance. Migrants from rural towns such as Grafton, Virginia, united in Washington for mutual assistance and often held parties to raise



Over the years Wisconsin Senator John C. Spooner employed Mary, Memphis, Charles, and various other family members. He eventually helped Memphis secure his first government job. Courtesy, Library of Congress.

funds for their philanthropic "sick and accident" funds. Mary is also juggling at least two suitors here, Smith and Sprow.

1917

January 15 Mr. Diggs came in the morning gave me a ticket sent by Mr. Sprow. I saw him [Mr. Sprow] only once, I think. Mr Smith called in the evening and taken me to the dancing class. Gave me a box of Reeves Caramels.

January 17 Worked hard. Company for dinner. Home very late again.

January 18 Went out to work. Scolded by Currey [roommate] for not keeping our agreement in the day. Went to the Grafton boys dance had a wonderful time. Very much pleased with Mr. Sprow.

January 19 The day filled with work just like it was at night. Mr. Smith called on me in the evening with a gift. Oh, my!

January 20 Cleaned and sewed until 2 p.m. Went up to [sister] Amey's. I got an awful

scolding about the cologne. Letter from home as well.

January 21 An awful bad day. Prevented from going to night church. Mr. Sprow called for the first time. We went out. My feet got cold and I am very much impressed with Mr. Sprow. I wonder if he is married or has he been?

January 22 Went to Catholic entertainment [a party with liquor] at the Odd Fellows Hall. Such a crowd. But I had a nice time. Mr. Davis walked me home. Wanted to kiss me but I absolutely refused. Where is Mr. Sprow? He said he would attend. Why?

January 23 Missy gave me a new red cloth for the kitchen table. And I wish that someone might call to see me in the evening. Julia and Katherine come to see me. 11 p.m. wash my head. Where is he?

January 24 Worked. Had an awful time with my head this morning. Went to see Marian and Amey the evening we quarreled. I will not listen to them. My room is good and everything is too. Sent money home. I can talk with Amey. She can hear me but not brother.

January 25 Worked. Amey and I went shopping. I lost my purse but found it in Goldenbergs. Amey said it's a sign of bad living. But I found it, so what is the sign?

January 26 Waited for Stiners [one of her employers] and then go to the dance. I don't like Mr. Smith. I don't want him to come again. Why does Mr. Sprow not come back?

January 28 I started at five in the kitchen. This is the first time I have worked and made the fire too. I have worked and made the fire in many a day. I am sad because I only see Mr. Sprow walking with others. Does he know my name? Or me?

January 29 Worked. My thoughts today has been all on Mr. Sprow. I am really nearly if not all the way in love with him. I think of him all the time.

January 30 Worked. Mr. Smith come this evening and I tried hard to get out before he got

here. He went with me up to Amey's with me. Everybody seems happy but me, I'm so sad. Anyway I can't bear him. I am going to write him a letter of my mind. Brother will be more angry but I don't like him.

January 31 I arrive home five-thirty. Teddy and I go for a walk. We stop at Effie and then called on Henrietta. I look on the street. No Mr. Sprow. Where does he go?

February 1 I did go out today. Work is harder this day. Bertha's aunt died so we exchange nights for her to go to the funeral. I am working every day and with Bertha's nights—I will work every night this week. Extra work makes me too tired but I have to send money home. I went to see Lizzie after Mr. Sprow didn't call. I was so much grieved. I hope that I shall not be sorry that I like him so well.

February 8 Worked. Mr Sprow called in the evening. Each time he come I like him better. He stayed until eleven-thirty and then I was sorry to see him go.

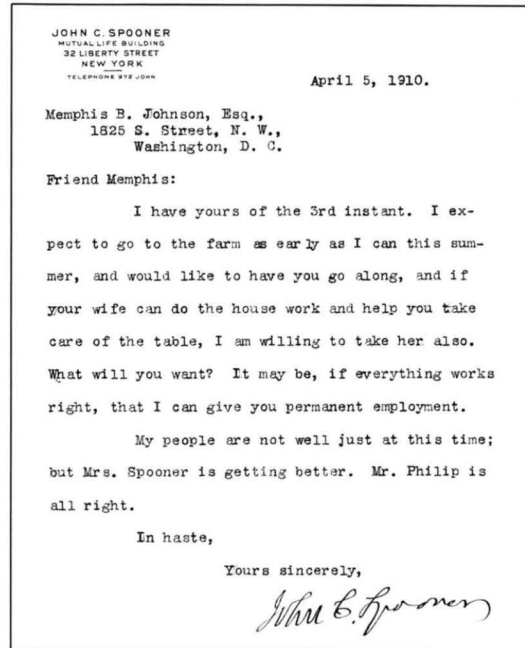
February 10 Worked and sewed. Served until eleven. Had head ache and tried everything to cure it. Braughnita [sister] and I had a spat. She said my hours with Mr. Sprow are too late. Why? I like him so, but he will not always come. Then, run him off? I did not. Braughnita can just tell.

February 11 Worked. Anxious day waiting for Mr. Sprow. At last he came at twenty to ten but I was happy to see him. I confess that I love him.

February 12 I tried to work but my thoughts ran all on Mr. Sprow. Miss Lizzie (sister-in-law) came to sit with me. I listened to her but he is my company. Brother sent her, I know it. Mr. Sprow can come late and Mr. Smith is not welcome. It is my room and my troubled mind.

February 14 Valentine Day and I had a letter from Mr. Smith. I am glad. I am glad it is over with us—and so easy. I feel happy. I will not feel sad.

February 15 I had a very bad day. Worked, had to serve tea at five. Mr. Sprow called at



This letter to Memphis Johnson from former Senator Spooner underscores how the whims of employers often separated live-in servants from their families.

9:15. How happy I was to see him and I really gave him my word of honor that I will always be true. I couldn't help it when he asked. I love him. Marian moved today and I know she is sad I did not come. I have to see him.

February 18 Worked. Marian and I went to Walters theater but it had not opened. We called on Henry and Mr. and Mrs. Edwards. Mr. Sprow called on me in the evening. How much I do love him. Marian is still very sad about me and him. Why? Why are my own brothers making me so low? I'm not, but they don't hear me—I will speak up and soon.

February 22 George Washington's birthday. Worked out. Had a pleasant afternoon. Marian and Julia came home with me. Mr. Sprow often disappoints me. They are so happy when he does.

February 26 Worked. Went to 20 Street to the movies. First time. And it is dark. Marian and Julia were scared. I was only a little scared of it. Movies are dark.

Washington History, Spring/Summer 1993

February 27 Worked. Josephine H. taken me to M Street movies. I am not scared now. Where is my love?

March 1 Lilla came to see me. And we went to the Masonic Temple. They were having a masquerade dance but we didn't go in. I like to look at them Negroes in fancy things. Mr. Sprow was not walking anywhere for me to see him.

March 8 Went downtown madified at the prices of things. Came by Julia and had tea. Mr. Sprow didn't come . . . fear of his not coming upsets me very much.

March 14 Worked hard and ironed late. I was disappointed Mr. Sprow didn't call.

March 16 Worked. Disappointed again. I did think with all my heart that would have got a message of some kind from him. I wonder if he is sick. I am sorry I love him so much.

March 20 A letter from Mr. Sprow. He has been sick.

March 23 I went to see Mr. Sprow again. He was better. He and I came near quarreling. But I don't see how I can do that. Was he not sick like Julia said? I wonder. She will send all the money home.

April 1 Sunday. Mr. Sprow has been out so he came over and went with me he had dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Richards. He went home and came back and spent the evening with me. I certainly enjoy his company. Will he come back? He will not say.

April 10 This certainly is not my lucky day, everything has gone wrong with me from morning until night. Disappointed Mr. Sprow did not call yet.

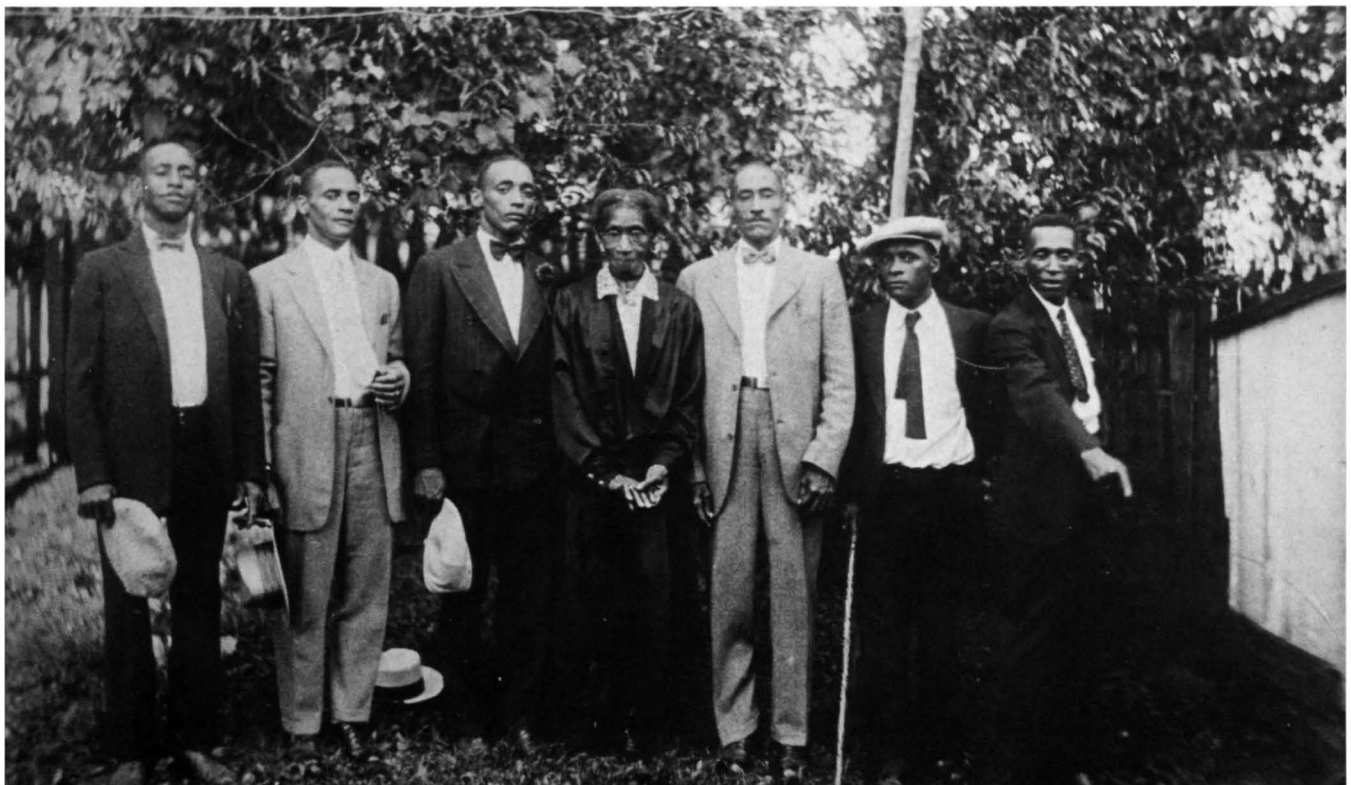
Mary Johnson, like most people working for day wages, paid insurance premiums weekly. Insurance agents (who were often quite insensitive) went door-to-door to collect from those marginally employed clients who were routinely late paying their premiums.

April 16 Insurance agent came this morning. How I hate those men. I sewed and went up to Marian's. No word.

April 21 Worked. Mr. Sprow called this evening the first time on a Saturday.

April 22 Sunday but I worked all day. Tadd, Julia and Katerine [friends from Catalpha] came. Mr. Sprow and I went out in the evening. They are sad for me but I am happy.

May 3 Mr. Sprow came but said his face was too swollen too bad to go to the ball. But I went



and he did not know until he saw me there. When I got ready to come home I got a mess after him. And I know that he was mad.

May 19 Miss Martha had a dinner tonight and we helped to wait it. Mr. Sprow came at 10 o'clock.

May 25 Worked. Mr. Sprow disappointed me tonight.

June 6 Mr. Sprow called this evening and I was still mad and he treated me bad. Say he was going away Friday. Now I have to go home. This has been a very bad day.

In June, Mary was summoned home and forced to take over her sister's live-in job. Mary and her peers, despite the freedom and adult life they had in Washington, still had to answer to their parents in the rural South. Dutifully, she follows the dictates of her Mother and returns to live-in service to hold her habitually ill sister's place.

June 11 Got to Culpeper today at 11:45. Stayed at Walter's until evening and then went out home.

June 13 Mother went to town. Wilmar, Hester [her two nieces] and I kept house. We had a nice time. Disappointed no letter.

June 16 Went out in the field and help Jeff to readdle rye. And Jeff taken me to the movies. Will go to Lake for sister [Julia]. Mother said this and I have to obey. I have no words in it. Must leave tomorrow. Will I ever see Mr. Sprow? Brother sent a letter, I know it. I can only write how sad all is for me.

June 19 Left Washington today for Lake George, we got to New York at 9:30 and stayed at the Belmont Hotel all night.

June 20 Left N.Y. at 8:45 for Albany reached Lake George at four o'clock. Mother sent me for

Eliza Johnson with six of her sons, (from left) Fred, Memphis, Jeff, Eliza, Walter, Lewis, and Hunter, circa 1924, in Catalpha. The mother of 19 of Peyton Johnson's children, Eliza exerted control over their lives long after most had moved to Washington.



This circa 1914 studio portrait shows, clockwise from top right, Mary Johnson and younger sisters Kate, Amey, Julia, and Marian. As each sister migrated to Washington, she would work for the Clark or Spooner families. Sister Kate was the author's grandmother. Sister Julia's ill health forced Mary back into live-in work in 1917.

Julia but soon I'll leave. A letter will come soon I hope for me to leave. How is Mr. Sprow? I write him again. I see no letters from him still.

June 21 New day for me again. Working and living in. But who is stealing down to the lake to watch the water? Me. I will do it every time now.

June 22 Wrote letters today and began trying to get things in order. The work seems so much more. I never can leave.

July 2 Mister arrives today and didn't have dinner until 8:30. I am tired but I will not cry. Mother's letter is firm with me. If I could just leave again. But where can I go?

July 13 I went to see the maids next door.

July 17 We went to the Falls today. A tiresome trip with no rest for me. Is this my life?



Never. The others laugh when I say it but I will leave this job. I know in my heart my family does not see it. I sent money home.

July 26 Expected some boys to come but they didn't. Disappointed at no letters from Mr. Sprow—so I wrote him. A mad one.

August 2 Mr. Wormley called on us so we played cards. I am winning again.

August 3 For the first time we did not have to serve dinner tonight. I am very sorry not to have a letter from Mr. Sprow. Is he sick?

August 6 Went to a demonstration at the old School House. Mr. Wormley walked up with me. He is nice for somebody else. I just feel that way. I am young and this is still good. He is not for me to love. Why does he like his work so? I told him my plans. He laughs again at me. I am still mad at him for that.

August 11 Disappointed at not getting a letter from Mr. Sprow. Mr. Wormley, Mr. Lindsey and Miss Stella came and played cards this evening we had lots of fun.

August 13 Miss Boone ask me to get Mr. Lindsey to take her to the ball.

August 16 Went to the dance tonight in the village had a nice time. But why no word from Mr. Sprow after all my letters to him. I will write and ask why.

August 24 I was disappointed at not getting letters from Mr. Sprow I don't know what is the matter with him. Julia is still sick. I hope to leave soon but no word from home except to tell about Julia's sickness.

August 26 I read a book today, the first in many a day.

Mary Johnson (left) poses with members of the household staff in Massachusetts during one of the trips she made as a live-in maid.

Out-of-town trips with her employers' families were particularly hard for the spirited, independent Mary to tolerate. Once she finally left live-in service in 1918, Mary vowed never to accompany her employers on vacation again.

"Duty and Fast Living"

While many of Mary's siblings were links in the chain of migration that led from rural Virginia to Washington, some stayed behind. At the time this diary was written, brother Walter Johnson had built this commercial building in Culpeper, which housed his successful barber shop, pool room, and grocery store as well as his brother Lewis's painting and decorating business. The Lewis A. Johnson Company moved to Washington in 1917 and remains in the home improvement business today.

September 11 Three of the boys from Fort William Henry came out had quite a party over to Stella's. Mr. Wormley and I went but didn't stay. Even mad at Mr. Sprow, I can't pledge with Mr. Wormley. I can't.

September 17 Chicken and another man came out to Stella and we had a fine game of whist.

September 24 Henrietta and I did some extra work for the people next door. Stella's people

came home. Mr. Wormley came down. Why does he still care? No letter from Washington. A sad girl.

September 28 Stella left today. I am sending a letter home for Elizabeth's [sister-in-law] kin. Stella gives her word to take it direct.

September 30 Mr. Wormley called today to say goodbye.

October 4 What to think of Washingtonians? I don't know. They have not wrote me a line since when. A letter comes and Julia in the hospital. She is still so sickly.

October 9 Caught a rabbit today and I kept his foot. Received work money today. Sent it right home. I'd see my way out if Elizabeth's cousin will only come. No letter yet, so I am still here.

October 18 Leaves Lake George today for Washington. Elizabeth's cousin will stay but



HOWARD THEATER

Andrew J. Thomas Theater Co., Props.

WEEK APRIL 15, 1918

The Quality Amusement Corporation, New York City

Robert Levy, Gen. Mgr.

Presents

"THE MASTER MIND"

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Parker, a Servant	James C. Stith
Walter Blount, alias Diamond Willie	Arthur T. Ray
Andrew Watkins, alias the Master Mind	Clarence E. Muse
Mrs. Blount, alias Milwaukee Sadie	Carlotta Freeman
John Blount, alias Black Hawk	Chas. H. Moore
Cortland Wainwright, Ex-District Atty.	Andrew S. Bishop
Professor Forbes, an Alienist	Chas. Lucas
Lucene Blount, alias Maggie Flint	Cleo Desmond
Mr. Marshall, a Detective	H. L. Pryor
Susan, a Servant	Ruth Foster Matthews
Jim Creegan, Crook	James C. Stith

SYNOPSIS OF SCENES

ACT I The apartment of Walter Blount, New York
Present Day

ACT II The home of the Wainwrights, on the Hudson
Two Months Later

ACT III The Same Time : 2.00 a. m.

ACT IV The Same Time : 5.00 a. m.

Hamilton Printing Company, 1535 M St, N. W.

As a day worker, Mary was free to see the plays and films she particularly enjoyed. According to her diary for April 15, 1918, she saw "The Master Mind" at the Howard Theater that day. This program from that performance is one of the many documents and ephemera collected by Mary Johnson Sprow over her long life.

the girls [of the employer's family] say they will miss me. I was glad to leave them.

At this point Mary returns to her freedom in Washington. Her sister Julia's job is secure in the hands of family. She returns to day work, probably for a number of employers, and rents another room. She rekindles her romance with Mr. Sprow and attends the Chauffeurs Ball, the major working-class social event of the season. The ball was founded by White House staff of the 1890s.

October 20 Arrives in Washington at eight thirty. Calls on Marian she was out. Arrive on

duty at 6 p.m. Mr. Sprow called on me. He leaves too soon again.

October 21 Marian and I go out to Falls Church to see Julia. She is so weak. I tell her about Elizabeth's cousin. She worries for her job. Even weak she worries. I worry about Mr. Sprow. Is he in Washington yet?

October 23 Mr. Sprow disappoints me again.

October 29 The girl disappointed me so I didn't get away for my vacation day.

November 6 Mr. Sprow and I went to Dudley's. Went to the hospital to see Julia but only saw the baby. Returned to 1746 N Street.

November 12 Mr. Sprow disappointed me tonight and I didn't go to the movies but I went to the dance.

November 13 Mr. Sprow called tonight he was mad with me and I was mad with him.

November 19 I left a note in the hotel for Sprow and still he didn't come. I don't know what is the matter with him.

November 20 Mr. Sprow didn't come tonight so I went past the Hotel. I think I shall fall out when we meet again. I am hearing that he is self conceited.

November 29 Thanksgiving Day we had a dinner party. I am glad that I have gotten over the feeling that Mr. Sprow did care now I see that he don't.

December 3,5 After I close the house I went to see Margaret. Went to the Chauffeurs' Ball.

December 6 I went to a party and met Mr. Sprow's sisters. I made my vow in my heart. I will marry Mr. Sprow.

December 8 I didn't go out tonight. I was too tired.

December 26 I have not wrote in my book for several days. Nothing new to write about. Mr. Sprow is faithful and comes every night.

"Duty and Fast Living"



Mary Johnson and Luray Sprow married on January 21, 1918, but announced their marriage on February 18, the date on which they moved into their first apartment together at 1842 15th Street, N.W.

1918

January 1 New Year's Day work. In the afternoon I took Tadd and called on Marian. She is still frying buck wheat cakes on a oil stove in her room. No water and gas had frozen.

January 5 Worked. Mr. Sprow didn't come over tonight the first time since Dec. 6th. I washed my head.

January 14 One year ago since I met Luray Sprow and he did come over this evening the first time in days.

January 17 This is the second Thursday that I left Marian's because they say very impolite things to Mr. Sprow. It is cold there.

January 19 A hard day of work. Mr. Sprow brought the license for us to be married and it shocked my nerves. Then I saw them names on the paper. Brother, Marian and Julia are still very cross with me. Kate writes a letter but will not write home about Mr. Sprow. I know she will sometime soon.

January 21 One part of the day I was so nervous to think I am about to start a new life. This is a day that I shall always remember. It is a beautiful day and it is my wedding day.

January 22 Rose early this morning worked and washed. I met Sprow in the afternoon.

February 1 Married two weeks and is happy and now looking out for a room.

February 18 Found a room and have moved into it. [This is the day she will place on the marriage announcements—the day when they finally have an address of *their own*.]

February 21 We have been married one month today and this our first night in our room.

March 7 Had a little reception tonight had a pleasant time.

March 30 My birthday and husband and I went to the theater.

March 31 Easter Sunday had a quiet day.

April 15 Went to a show. For years I have loved these plays most of all. Amey loves them too. How I miss Kate when we have such fun!

April 21 We have been married three months today. Quite happy so far. We have not had a fight so far—but I see small things that he do.

